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TAGS: [IZ](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: "CHANGE" IS AFOOT IN DOHUK, BUT ARRIVES  
LATE IN THE KRG ELECTION SEASON

REF: A. BAGHDAD 1473  
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 1170

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor John Fox for reason 1.4 (d).

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (SBU) In preparation for the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament (IKP) elections planned for July 25, Nawshirwan Mustafa's party -- the Change list -- has finally established a presence in Dohuk, the northernmost province of the Kurdistan Region. So far, the Change list has found a lukewarm reception in the province. Contacts cite late arrival of the Change message, the Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP) dominant position in the province and the "wall of fear and silence" that characterizes Dohuk's political culture, as factors that undermine opposition parties. There are reports that local KRG security forces are intimidating Change list supporters; observers expect this will intensify as the campaigning continues (see reftels). RRTOff learned that while Dohuk leaders of the Change list are optimistic about their prospects, others from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) members (including youth league members) question whether the Change list will win many seats, if any, in Dohuk. End Summary.

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"A Peshmerga Sent into Battle with a Broken Gun"  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Although Dohuk has always been a Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)-dominated province, Hishyar Abid, head of the Change list in Dohuk, joined the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) shortly after it was established. He served as a PUK Peshmerga from 1978 until 1985, after which he left the KRG for the United Kingdom. Abid lived in the UK until one month ago, when he was asked by former PUK Deputy General Secretary Nawshirwan Mustafa, the head of the Change List party in the KRG, to serve as lead organizer for the movement in Dohuk (Comment: Abid is not running for office in the IKP election. End Comment). Kamirwan Barwari, Abid's "teammate in this effort" is a professor of Political Science at the University of Dohuk. Barwari is well-known in Dohuk for his nonconformist views. Most recently, he attracted unwanted attention from the KDP for commenting to local press outlet "Sbeiy" that it was "unbelievable that there were not nine or ten good presidential candidates" for the upcoming election. Together, the two men are charged with building a base for the Change party list in Dohuk -- a task that both believe to be a steep uphill climb.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Abid acknowledges that the Change list came late to Dohuk and was not well factored into Nawshirwan's plan (Note: the Change list party just established an office in Dohuk in May. End Note). He says that this was because Dohuk has a special status as a "private garden" of the KDP, and that KDP has always been a Stalinist party with a very rigid

hierarchy and no tolerance for internal dissent. Abid says that no other political parties have ever been able to develop real support, and that while their existence is permitted, they have only been able to operate within limits.

As such it is his view that the Change list is entering a "locked territory," and that they are an unwelcome intrusion.

For the same reasons, Barwari said, the democratic tradition in Dohuk has always been weak and freedom of self-expression has always been harshly repressed. He added, "More than any other province (in the KRG), Dohuk is in the greatest need for democratic change."

14. (SBU) According to Abid, another reason for the Change list's late arrival in Dohuk is the fact that Nawshirwan did not have a network of trusted people in Dohuk, which limited his ability to build a base early in the process. Abid admits that Change did not take advantage of many early opportunities to sell their message and so characterizes himself, the newly-appointed messenger, as "a Peshmerga who was sent into battle with a broken gun." Nawshirwan did not choose any Dohuk residents for the top ten positions on the Change list, sending the message that Change does not really prioritize having Dohuk included in the among its IKP representatives. Further, the press coverage of Nawshirwan's message is almost exclusively in Sorani Kurdish. Dohuk is Bahdini Kurdish speaking. He lamented that the few stories that are translated into Bahdini Kurdish are not about Dohuk. Nonetheless, Abid believes that this election will be foundation of a much greater role for Change in Dohuk and the wider Iraq. "There will be other elections in Kurdistan. We must also not forget that there are almost 1.5 million Kurds in Baghdad, most of whom do not like the KDP or PUK." Abid predicts that future parliamentary

elections, in which he says that Change list has definite plans to participate, will be a "big win for Change."

15. (SBU) So far, Abid says, he and other Dohuk Change list organizers have not been aggressively targeted by local security. But other Dohuk supporters also report being harassed, often called to appear at their nearest KDP office and justify their activities "where the mere implication of the threat of what could happen next is enough to cause the person to reconsider their actions." One supporter, who resigned from his position as a bodyguard member for an influential member of the KDP, was detained by the Asaish for 20 days due to his activities in support of the Change list. Abid said that the man's family was reportedly so afraid of additional persecution that they refused to provide Change with any information with which to assist an investigation into their son's case. When asked for an estimation of the number of Change list supporters in Dohuk, Abid said that without intimidation, fear and vote rigging, Change would receive roughly 50,000-60,000 votes (primarily from within the intellectual community.) But since Abid is certain that all of this and more will factor into this election, the number of votes Change will actually receive from Dohuk is unknown. (Comment: According to IHEC, there are 556,673 registered voters in Dohuk.)

16. (SBU) Abid relayed to RRTOff a conversation he had with Nawshirwan on his plans to rectify the imbalance in provincial resource allocation that has disadvantaged Dohuk (relative to Erbil and Sulaimaniyah) since the end of the PUK-KDP civil war. Abid said that Nawshirwan agreed that the KRG should make equal treatment of, and improved service delivery to all of three provinces a priority, and that Nawshirwan has a program to facilitate that goal. Abid said that Nawshirwan further noted that there were many examples of very well-administered democratic countries comprised of a plurality of ethnicities and languages (e.g., Switzerland), and said that there was no reason why Kurdistan could not be a diverse but well-administered region, as well.

¶7. (SBU) Salar Doski, Head of the Dohuk Branch of the PUK, believes that Abid's estimation of the number of Nawshirwan supporters in Dohuk is unrealistic. Doski estimates that Nawshirwan will only win 8-10 seats in the IKP, and that no appreciable percentage of the votes he receives will come from Dohuk voters. Doski said that people in Dohuk and Erbil do not like Nawshirwan because they remember when he was a PUK Peshmerga; he also claimed that people from Dohuk believe that Nawshirwan does not care to know what they think. Doski opined that the Change list party would have been better received if it were launched immediately after the (1991) Uprising. In his view, many people now have developed a vested interest in the existing system, so it will be difficult for Change to convince them to sacrifice their individual interests for a reformed system.

¶8. (SBU) The PUK Youth League in Dohuk seemed a bit more optimistic about Nawshirwan's prospects, but were no more convinced that he would win many seats from Dohuk. In a recent meeting, the youth league informed RRTOff that many university students in Dohuk seem excited about Nawshirwan's message. The 15 youth league members in attendance also believed that, even if he did not win a majority of the Qbelieved that, even if he did not win a majority of the seats, Nawshirwan's presence in the IKP would push the two major parties (PUK and KDP) to work harder to improve public administration. When asked for an estimate of the number of seats they thought he would win in the IKP (KRG-wide), numbers ranged from 8 to 20. But when asked whether the Change list had broad appeal in Dohuk, the youth league members thought it did not. One extremely skeptical student said, "He says that he is for change, but he was the number two in the PUK for many years. If he did not make change then, why will he make change now?"

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Comment  
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¶9. (C) Contacts in Dohuk identify very real barriers to the Change list's message in the Province. With a long history of exclusion from political and economic development, the people of Dohuk seem even less likely to support a candidate whose campaign attentions seem limited to Sulaimaniyah. Conversely, a candidate who truly conveyed an intention to treat the three provinces equally and to unite the KRG in more than name only could likely give the political establishment quite a run for their money. It appears that Change list is making great efforts to be cast as the latter.

In recent days, Change says that it has made great in-roads with tribal leaders and with the traditionally disenfranchised, such as the rural area populations of Dohuk who live furthest from resources and political empowerment. The RRT has also received anecdotal reports that ongoing protests in Iran have emboldened Kurdistanis to view their own upcoming election more critically.

¶10. (C) It is still too early to determine whether the Change message has arrived too late to convince Dohuk,s voters. The candidate for whom Dohuk votes will not only be an expression of their ideological sympathies on the day of the election, but of their fears of what will happen on the day after, as well. The jobs, socio-economic benefits and daily quality of life of hundreds of thousands of Kurdistanis voters currently depend on an intricate system of patronage that has been designed and maintained by the same KDP-PUK alliance and dominance that the Change list seeks to shake up. Voters, fears of losing access to this social safety net, combined with very real concerns of intimidation and voter fraud, complicate any attempt to predict how many Dohuk votes will be counted for Change on decision day. End Comment.  
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